

VZCZCXRO0354
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #1678/01 1871038
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 061038Z JUL 06
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2644
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 1465
RUEHXS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 001678

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [HUMANR](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: POLOFF VISITS BAC GIANG, MEETS WITH LOCAL BAPTISTS AND
OFFICIALS

HANOI 00001678 001.2 OF 003

Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) On June 19, Poloff met with provincial officials in Bac Giang Province and sat in on a heated exchange between Baptist believers and local commune officials. Provincial officials acknowledge that the province does not plan to register the group anytime soon under the GVN's framework on religion. That said, the access to the Baptist's house church that we were given -- despite initial attempts to deny the existence of the group and to warn the group from meeting with us after we made clear our intention to meet -- was a positive development. The frank discussion between local officials and the Baptists that our visit generated was even more surprising. The Ambassador will visit the province and the Baptists on July 6. End Summary and Comment.

2. (SBU) On June 19, Poloff and Pol Assistants traveled to Bac Giang Province and met with the Provincial People's Committee's (PPC) Chief of Staff Nguyen Sy Nhan and Director of the Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (DERA) Vu Dinh Canh. Poloff sought clarification about the harassment of a Baptist congregation in Song Mai Commune after it attempted to register in early May. Local authorities allegedly interrogated Pastor Than Van Truong, the head of the church, and told members of the congregation that "Protestantism is an illegal American religion" and that "God will never exist in the north." (Note: Truong was committed to a mental institution in July 2004 after sending letters to provincial officials calling on them to abandon Communist teachings and follow Christian scripture instead. He was released on September 17, 2005 after reportedly signing a document acknowledging a mental illness. Since his release, Truong has strenuously advocated religious freedom over GVN objections. End Note.)

Officials are evasive about existence of Protestants...

3. (SBU) Although Nhan noted that "every story has two sides," he also acknowledged that "rumors sometimes are based in facts." Describing the province's religious demographics, Canh said there are 300 Catholic deacons in Bac Giang and four priests serving 25,000 Catholics among the province's residents. There are 150,000 Buddhist adherents who worship in 618 pagodas with the assistance of 71 monks. Canh repeated the standard GVN talking points that Vietnam guarantees religious freedom for all, but that "the State also needs to maintain national solidarity among all citizens and guarantee the spiritual well-being of the people." The Bac Giang PPC aspires to create favorable conditions for religious activities and works closely with the Catholic and Buddhist clergy to establish this environment. Canh categorically rejected the existence of Protestants in the province and refused to discuss problems with the registration of Pastor Truong's Baptist group.

...but then discuss registration and deny harassment

14. (SBU) After his initial denial that Protestants live in Bac Giang, Canh said provincial officials will abide by the PM's Instruction on Protestantism, but "prospective Protestants must fulfill certain criteria before they can properly register." Groups must demonstrate a spiritual need for religion, after which they may meet in small groups. Following this stage, a congregation must develop correct rituals according to a doctrine that does not interfere with traditional customs. The group must then have a nationally-recognized umbrella organization "recommend their application" to the province. In addition, the applicant congregation must have a leader who resides in the province, he said.

15. (SBU) Canh acknowledged that a Baptist group did attempt to apply for registration in May in Song Mai. The district's Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee rejected their application because Baptist Protestantism is not a recognized faith in Vietnam, and because Pastor Truong is not a legal resident of Bac Giang. (Note: Although Truong was born in Bac Giang, he is legally resident in Dong Nai Province. End Note.) Furthermore, local police interrogated Pastor Truong because he has an outstanding debt with the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (Agribank), not because they were trying to persecute him for his religious beliefs. (Note: According to local officials, Pastor Truong moved to Dong Nai Province in 1984, leaving an unsettled loan of VND 18 million with the Agribank. When Truong returned to Bac Giang in May 2006, he committed to repay his debt, now amounting to VND 75,810,000 with compounded interest, by June 15, 2006. Truong allegedly did not pay as promised. End Note.)

16. (SBU) Canh assured Poloff that provincial authorities do not differentiate in their treatment of different religious denominations, but only focus on facilitating "activities at home"

HANOI 00001678 002.2 OF 003

for groups that do not meet provincial criteria for registration. "We do not prevent anyone from practicing their faith at home," Vu concluded. Nhan added that an allegation that police forced the removal of a cross from the exterior of the Song Mai house church was taken out of context. The police intervened because several members of the family owning the house disagree over the practice of Protestantism and local officials simply settled a family conflict, he asserted.

Song Mai officials criticize Pastor Truong

17. (SBU) Embassy team later traveled to Song Mai Commune and met with the Chairman of the People's Committee (PC), Mr. Do Van Bao, and the President of Vietnam Fatherland Front's (VFF) Veterans Association (VA), Mr. Nguyen Van Chien. On the subject of the difficulties faced by the Song Mai Baptists in registering, Bao acknowledged that the group had applied for registration, but reiterated the PPC officials' arguments for why the application had been denied. Bao further noted that, aside from his financial problems, "Truong also tries to preach Protestantism to his extended relatives." While the commune respects the freedom of religion for every Vietnamese citizen, the PC cannot allow "anyone to exploit a religion to disrupt the solidarity of the commune, force the people to believe and to work against the GVN." Villagers are displeased with Truong's conversion of the owners of the Baptist's place of worship.

18. (SBU) Poloff immediately challenged Bao's arguments and insisted that stability is preserved only when local officials provide legal means for people to organize their religion openly. It is the responsibility of the PC to explain that people are free to believe under Vietnam's legal system. Bao answered that the commune does not prevent any individual from worshipping at home, but Pastor Truong has not completed the necessary paperwork for registration and does not cooperate with commune's officials.

¶9. (SBU) Embassy team visited the house in which the Song Mai Baptists meet. It is owned by an elderly couple, and during the meeting with them, Poloff asked the local officials for Pastor Truong to also be allowed to participate in the discussion. The PC officials appeared displeased but did not prevent him from joining the meeting. Pastor Truong informed Poloff that a local MPS officer had just told him not to meet with the Embassy team. An uncomfortable local official tried to explain that the Embassy team had only requested a meeting with the house church residents, but "if the hosts are not opposed to Truong's presence, the PC has no objections." The house church owner said that he and his wife welcome Baptist followers to worship in their house and that the Baptist group followed legal procedures per the PM's Instruction on Protestantism, when it applied to register the group in May. However, local officials rejected both the congregation's application and suggested that the congregation file its request at the central level. Pastor Truong also met with CRA officials in Hanoi but without much result.

¶10. (SBU) Local MPS officers subsequently informed the couple that "under secret instructions the commune's PC will never register Protestants." The homeowner concluded that while he believes that Protestantism is a virtuous religion, his discouragement and fear forced him "to give up and not to pursue the matter further." However, the two homeowners still believe in Protestantism. "Americans are by our side and I hope the congregation will be able to register," he added. One of the local officials present loudly asserted that the commune's responsibility is "to guide the people to conduct activities in accordance to the law." National unity is crucial and national solidarity comes before international obligations, he said.

¶11. (SBU) Continuing, the local official said that the commune's position is that "preaching Protestantism is legal, but needs authorization from local authorities." At this point, one of the house church owners confronted the official: "How can you make such a statement after you visited us yesterday and claimed that Protestantism is an American religion and will never be allowed in Song Mai. You said yesterday that Song Mai's VFF will crush Protestantism in the commune while it is still only an egg." She then turned to Poloff and asked him whether local authorities' allegations that the USG is rewarding Protestants with VND 1,000,000 for each Protestant conversion were true. After Poloff rejected the allegation, the homeowner then shouted at the PC officials: "You see! It's official! The Americans are not paying us!"

Comment

HANOI 00001678 003.2 OF 003

¶12. (SBU) Despite the sophomoric attempts by local officials to limit our access to the Song Mai Congregation, this visit was an important step forward in forcing the provincial and commune officials to deal with their Protestants in an open and legal manner. It is particularly striking that the Baptists felt comfortable challenging the local officials directly in front of the Embassy team. We have heard from the house church owner that since our visit, the Baptists have been left alone by local police and other officials. Despite this positive development, Bac Giang will likely not register the group any time soon. We expect that the Province will allow the Baptists to worship at home in the interim if only because of our direct attention.

MARINE